

# In Conversation with Manuel Rabaté and Dr Souraya Noujaim

Alexander (Sami) Kardos-Nyheim

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*Manuel Rabaté is Director of Louvre Abu Dhabi. He has taught Arts & Cultural Management at Paris-Dauphine University and Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi. He is a Knight of France's National Order of Merit.*

*Dr Souraya Noujaim is Scientific, Curatorial & Collections Management Director of Louvre Abu Dhabi. She has studied the British Museum's Arabic weights and measures, and has been Islamic Art History Chair at the École du Louvre.*

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*Louvre Abu Dhabi sits at a tense but enriching cultural crossroads. The museum brings the name of France's most treasured cultural institution to the desert of the United Arab Emirates. The museum is innovative but its geopolitical context is difficult: a background of continuous government negotiations, and the cultural friction between East and West. The institution's Director, Manuel Rabaté, and Curatorial Director, Dr Souraya Noujaim, discussed their creative vision and difficulties with honesty.*

## Manuel Rabaté, Director

**CJLPA: Louvre Abu Dhabi arose in 2017 out of a 2007 agreement between France and the UAE. What was the intention behind the agreement?**

**Manuel Rabaté:** This agreement was extraordinarily visionary. You cannot read it in isolation. It was part of a master plan to make Abu Dhabi an important international centre of knowledge, education, sustainability, and tourism. It was made in tandem with other agreements that led to Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, Berkley Abu Dhabi, New York University Abu Dhabi, Zayed University and National Museum, and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Tourism was undoubtedly an important motive. The government of Abu Dhabi was keen to ensure diversification of economic assets, and found that strong investment in its educational and cultural fibre was an excellent way of achieving this. The UAE federation dates only to 1971, but the place has a rich, much older heritage. The UAE wants to preserve this and create a cultural legacy. There is much more there than just the sun.

The community is built on other institutions and ideals too. Many of the buildings in which Abu Dhabi's cultural institutions sit have been designed by Western architects, and many institutions bear Western names. But they are not necessarily extensions of Western points of view and ways of doing things. A key part of the vision

behind Louvre Abu Dhabi, as well as the wider cultural objectives of the Abu Dhabi government, was to promote a universal story. Much like the British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris are not museums of British art or French art, Louvre Abu Dhabi is place where you invite the world to come and see how you perceive human interconnectedness. We want to tell the story of the world through artworks and objects of beauty, at the same time raising points about Arab identity and the interaction of East and West. This may sound like a cliché, but I mean it truly.

**CJLPA: What are your goals as Director?**

**MR:** My mission as Director can be structured around four pillars, which chime with what my view of what a museum is.

First, I want to focus on the building itself and its surroundings. We have an incredible, delicate building on the sea. It is a challenge to maintain, but I take pride in being its custodian and improving its health and accessibility.

Second, I want to be accountable for the contents of the building. We are a museum of the twenty-first century. In its most basic form, a museum must be a collection of artwork or artefacts. In our case, you will see the collection of the government of Abu Dhabi, and lent artworks from French museums. This latter part is a growing, moving, semi-permanent collection, through which we seek to tell a unique story of the world. Unlike the universal or encyclopaedic conception of a museum, where eras and cultures are strictly organised and segregated, we tell a story in pure chronological order. As you walk through the rooms, you walk through time. You begin with beauty in its most basic form, when men and women first came to exist and gain consciousness. We can see ourselves in them. As you move to other rooms, you see objects from different

civilisations together, linked by their common chronological connection. You are made to embrace what was happening in all the world at a particular point in time. We have an anthropological, not a scientific, base. Our collection is constantly supplemented also by other regional museums, adding a strong Arab element which other museums sometimes overlook. It is difficult to balance these narratives, but we strive to do it at all times.

Third, I want to ensure a very memorable museum experience. We need to cater to demand by striking a balance between business and hospitality. We want to make the museum an inclusive place for ‘people of determination’ and people of different cultures and languages. Our key performance indicator is still the number of visitors we get, but since the COVID-19 pandemic started our digital footprint has become very important. We are working on shifting the experience from a purely physical one to a meaningful online one.

Fourth, I want to enable staff development. I want to create a new generation of Emirati museum specialists. I do not want this to be a purely French affair. I want to revisit what it means to be, for example, a security guard, or indeed a museum curator.

**CJLPA: You operate in a very complicated geopolitical environment. There are scandals where loaned art disappears, for example. How, as a museum, do you separate political and diplomatic considerations from creative and intellectual considerations?**

**MR:** We don’t separate these considerations. Louvre Abu Dhabi is born from an inter-governmental agreement, but it is an Abu Dhabi entity. My chain of command goes to the Chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi, but this does not entail ‘political games’. Our very name represents what can be framed as a political ambition: the fusion of a major city with a major national institution. We are a new museum. We do not seek to impose old or alien political ideals on our audiences here, unlike some other institutions—though I will not drop names here.

**CJLPA: What is the role of art, and the museums that contain it, in a time of crisis?**

**MR:** Developing a generation of Emirati art lovers and art specialists will build long-term ‘resilience’—and I know this word is used a lot—to societal challenges we will face in the future. But in the short term, with regard to the COVID-19 crisis, there is a clear need for beauty, reconstruction, social places, and aspirational thoughts. These, the museum can provide. We want to create a mindful museum, or as we call it in French, an institution à l’écoute. COVID-19 has assaulted the connections between people. We are told it is dangerous to speak with and be close to people! We offer a way to reconstruct and reimagine being together, as our institution is itself a meeting of cultures and thought. In far more practical terms, we have also held events for front-line workers and vulnerable people. Naturally, we are all vaccinated!

This period has obvious challenges, but they show that we have to revisit the museum experience. How should it feel to look around? Should visitors be guided by a digital usher? How do we ensure that visitors can relax and meditate, should they choose to? It is easy to reject digital solutions to what is clearly a very human experience. However, we should not shy away from what I call ‘digital maturity’, which will bring more answers than one may initially anticipate.

## Dr Souraya Noujaim, Scientific, Curatorial & Collections Management Director

**CJLPA: Some have said that the effort to make a museum a ‘visitor experience’ can come at the expense of integrity, or ‘dumb it down’. Do you agree?**

**Dr Souraya Noujaim:** In a way I agree, and this is why a museum needs a very careful curatorial and scientific team. We have to avoid becoming an ‘exhibition hall’. This is why, within the curatorial department I lead, we are setting up and developing a research group to explore the question of cultural connection, through different materials. We do work for an audience, but we want to give that audience meaningful, deep content.

**CJLPA: The Louvre is originally a French institution. But its manifestation here in Abu Dhabi has a new identity. What emerges from the interaction between an age-old French institution and the surroundings of Abu Dhabi?**

**SN:** Beyond the obvious institutional cooperation required by the inter-governmental agreement that gave rise to Louvre Abu Dhabi, what has emerged is the idea of a ‘semi-permanent collection’, a shared display that rotates regularly with other institutions around the world. This allows us to fine-tune our intuitions and thematic tendencies. The act of collaboration also brings something very new and rich to museum practice. When two parts of the world with so many specialities are put together, the ensuing exploration and development of shared forms and themes are very valuable. Right before COVID-19 struck we had an exhibition on *furūsiyya*, the Arab counterpart of the European ideal of chivalry. For this we discussed thoroughly over a scientific council how we could pair the Arab and European concepts. The discussion was probably unprecedented in terms of museum practice. Another example is a recent exhibition we opened in cooperation with Centre Pompidou, focussed on the spiritual cleansing of communities after COVID-19. We sought to trace the root of abstraction in non-Western art, particularly in Arab calligraphy.

**CJLPA: How much freedom do you have to explore new ideas in your role? Are you constricted by museum policy, or by the terms of the 2007 France–UAE agreement?**

**SN:** The idea of creating a universal museum here really came from the government of Abu Dhabi. We have built a narrative with as wide a geographical and institutional spectrum as possible. My curatorial objectives are based on the collection we have in this museum and the artefact loans we have from other museums, both in France and nearer the UAE.

**CJLPA: Can your institution help society through a crisis like COVID-19?**

**SN:** I want us to have a soothing effect on society. Art has always been a companion of human beings. We have been closed for some time. The fact that we were able to share again the physical experience with the public was very important for us. We want the public to feel they can engage with us at a very profound level, and simply be influenced and made ‘mindful’ by the extraordinary architecture of this institution. We want the building, the surroundings, and the contents to be rooted in a sense of the region’s nature and history. In the COVID-19 situation, our museum has to be a companion to those who want or need one.

***CJLPA*: For a short period, the museum was online-only. This brings obvious limitations. Has it brought opportunities?**

**SN**: We updated and upgraded our online presence to provide people with as close an experience to the 'real thing' as possible. This included virtual guided tours of our exhibitions. This kept the exhibitions alive and reachable to the wider community.

***CJLPA*: Do you have any special projects planned?**

**SN**: We are in a state of constant motion. That is what I find most fulfilling about this institution. Throughout the pandemic we have been building our collection, especially of contemporary art. Three years since the opening, it is time for contemporary artists to have their faces shown in the institution. I want Louvre Abu Dhabi to display the work of young and old contemporary artists very soon. Contemporary art deserves a place like Louvre Abu Dhabi, and Louvre Abu Dhabi deserves this new kind of dialogue and challenge. I also want to see our scientific lab finalised. Ultimately, I want our academic focus to shift and be developed.

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